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ABSTRACT

A longitudinal study investigated early syntactic forms in child language; this paper reports on findings dealing with differences in approach to syntactic acquisition. Seven children aged 16-20 months were the subjects, and audio or video tapes were made once every three weeks beginning prior to the development of syntax. Data collection continued until 20 percent of the utterances specified a combination of subject + verb + complement. Analysis showed that the greatest difference among children was the length of time required to develop from the single word utterance to the subject + verb + complement structure--varying from 2 1/2 to 9 months. This reinforces the notion that speed of language acquisition varies considerably among children. It is noted that girls' syntactic development was considerably more rapid than boys'. Differences in syntactic acquisition based on speed and gender may be related to style differences in language development. Style differences between slow and rapid developers are examined in terms of presyntactic utterances, simplicity and complexity of utterance, indeterminate constructions not meeting English word order constraints, and subject and predicate specification. All factors showed a definite pattern relating to speed of syntactic acquisition. (CHK)

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Styles of Syntactic Acquisition*

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This longitudinal study investigated early syntactic forms systematically inorder to identify similarities and differences in language acquisition. Only the results dealing with differences in approach will be reported on today, however. Almost all previous research on early syntactic acquisition has centered upon the universal aspects of development and although individual differences have been assumed to exist, practically no attempts in recent psycholinguisitic research have been made to uncover these distinctions. Bloom (1970) revealed possible broad differences in approach to syntactic development among children although her initial purpose for the investigation was not in this direction. Bloom's findings were inconclusive however, since the children in her study were already producing syntactic forms when they were first observed. This suggests that they might have been producing identical utterance types at an earlier point in development.

PROCEDURE

Seven children, four girls and three boys, served as subjects in this longitudinal investigation. Data collection took the form of either audio or video tapes taken once every three weeks for two hours beginning prior to the onset of syntax. The children ranged in age from 16 to 20 months at this point. Data collection continued in a naturalistic free play situation until 20% of the child's syntactic utterances specified a combination of subject+verb+complement. Complement structures were employed instead of

the more usual object component in order to account for predicate forms which included not only direct and indirect objects but also prepositions, prepositional phrases, adverbs, adverbial phrases and predicate adjectives which modify the subject. Analysis and interpretation of the collected data depended upon determination of subject, verb and complement structure, thus, the semantic intent or function of the utterance was determined on the basis of three types of disambiguating situational information:

1. the non-linguistic context
2. the preceding adult utterance
3. the child's own utterances which immediately followed the utterance under analysis.

The analyses of the emerging syntactic structure of the seven children studied indicated that the outstanding difference among the children was the number of months required to pass from the single word utterance stage to the time when early syntactic structure was established. The time lapse between the first syntactic utterance and the time when at least 20% of the child's syntactic forms included a subject+verb+complement structure varied from 2½ to 9 months. This measure of difference among the children evidenced what had been long recognized, that speed of language acquisition varies considerably from child to child. In fact, whenever language acquisition differences have been discussed, as by Brown Cazden and Bellugi (1969), the speed of acquisition has been described as the primary, if not the only, distinction in language

acquisition style.

For the seven children examined in this study the speed of acquisition measure did not vary along a continuum. Rather, it was possible to divide the children according to whether their syntax emerged rapidly or slowly. The rapid syntactic developers proceeded from single word utterances to criterion in 2½ to 4 months. The slow syntactic developers required between 7 and 9 months to reach criterion. For this particular sample, the rapid-slow split also resulted in a division of the children according to sex. All the boys in the study developed new syntactic classes slowly; while for the girls, syntactic development was considerably more rapid. It should be noted that the measure used was the rate of acquisition or the number of months from the emergence of two word utterances until the syntactic criterion was met, rather than either the chronological age of the child at the time when syntax emerged or the child's chronological age when criterion was reached.

Although the division according to sex could have resulted from the size of the sample the observed sex difference in this study supports the familiar speculation that girls develop language more rapidly than boys. This finding is not startling although it does cast some light on possible differences between boys and girls. Although it is interesting to note that children may develop syntax slowly or rapidly and this distinction may

be sex-related, it would be more enlightening to know whether the kinds of structures that are used are related to this speed-sex difference. In other words, are there style differences which are related to speed of syntactic acquisition? The data reveal many indications that this is the case. The types of structures employed appear to differ in several ways.

PRESYNTACTIC FORMS

The first indication of structural differences in style was in the use of what I have called presyntactic forms. Although several types of presyntactic forms were noted, each involved the notion of extention by means of an empty form. The use of this empty extention occurred in several different ways.

1. A single phonetic element preceding a single word, i.e. /ɪ ball/, /æ ball/, /ʌ ball/ and /i ball/ were all used by one child to indicate the existence of a ball.
2. Reduplication of a single word as in /ball ball/ was used to point to a single ball in a non-recurrent situation.
3. A phonetically stable unit was used in combination with other words but in so many different situations that no apparent referent could be found, e.g. /idi ball/ when reaching for a ball, /idi balloon/ when asking the examiner for another one, /idi dance/ when he himself was dancing and /idi nice/ while looking at a new toy. This is comparable to the /wida/ phenomenon described by Bloom (1973).

The use of these presyntactic forms was extensive for those children who developed syntax slowly and they were employed throughout the observational period. The rapid developers either did not use these forms al all; or if they did appear, they were used only to a limited degree or prior to the onset of syntax. The heavy and continued dependence upon presyntactic forms by the slow developers may have signaled their possible function. They appeared to allow the child to combine elements without having to deal with reference and word order constraints. The presyntactic forms appeared to be a way of easing into syntax that allowed a transition from single word utterances into syntax without requiring the child to deal with content or semantic function. This easing into syntax by the slow developers may signal a greater difficulty with syntactic relations. For the rapid developers, where presyntax is minimal or non-existent, the acquisition of syntax may not present the same problems.

COMPLEXITY ANALYSIS

In the original analysis, each child's affirmative syntactic utterances were grouped according to a hypothesized simplicity-complexity dimension which was upheld across all seven children. Within this complexity model Group I utterances, the earliest emerging syntactic constructions, consisted of an expanded single grammatical element-either an expanded subject, expanded verb or an expanded complement. Expansions were considered to be the specification of either a subject, verb or complement in more

than a single word. For example;/big ball/, produced as the child threw a ball, specified an expanded complement whereas /wanna go/ specified an expanded verb. Group II utterances were composed of two grammatical relations combined with no expansion; e.g., subject+verb specification as in /mommy run/ or verb+complement specification as in /run home/. Utterances in Group III combined two grammatical relations one of which was expanded; e.g., expanded subject+verb as in /big ball fall/ when a ball rolled off a shelf or verb+expanded complement as in /go home now/ which was directed to this examiner by one of the children. Finally, Group IV was composed of constructions in which all three grammatical relations were combined in a subject+verb+complement form; e.g., /Lisa eat fast/ or /Snoopy fall down/.

The rate differences noted in length of time required to reach criterion were reflected in this simplicity-complexity dimension. The rapid developers moved very quickly from Group I utterances through to criterion once syntax emerged, such that at each succeeding session the next higher level of complexity was represented. In contrast, the slow developers acquired a level of syntactic complexity, became productive with it and then employed that particular sentence type for several weeks or months before reaching the next higher level of complexity.

INDETERMINATE CONSTRUCTIONS

The two groups of children were also divided according to whether they produced utterances which failed to observe word order constraints for English. For the rapid developers, utter-

ances in which word order constraints were not observed constituted between 3.3% and 3.8% of their total syntactic output. In contrast, two of the slow syntactic developers did not produce these utterance types at all and for the one child who did, they constituted .8% of his total syntactic output.

The descriptive difference between the two groups of children may be related to speed of syntactic acquisition and syntactic facility. The relative freedom in word ordering displayed by the rapid developers compared with the tendancy to maintain word order displayed by the slow developers may signal a difference in risk-taking behavior related to speed. Although it might have been expected that the slow syntactic developers would have more difficulty learning English word order since syntax appeared to present more problems for them generally, this opposite finding may be explained by the notions of overt as opposed to covert practice. Covert practice would result in adherence to English word order and might account for the slow progression from one complexity level to the next in the slow syntactic developers, whereas overt word order practice would result in word ordering errors produced in a rush to achieve syntactic facility.

SUBJECT VS. PREDICATE SPECIFICATION

Another measure of difference between the two groups of children was in relation to subject and predicate specification. Recent literature on subject and predicate specification has

been in almost universal agreement regarding the sequence of acquisition of these two components. Researchers such as Sinclair (1971), Menyuk (1969), Gruber (1967) and Kelley (1967) have all asserted that predicate structures emerge prior to subject structures. In an effort to examine this phenomenon, each of the children's earliest syntactic constructions were examined for the specification of subjects and predicates. The results of this analysis revealed that for each of the slow syntactic developers predicate structures always emerged first with subjects always being added several weeks to months later. The rapid syntactic developers however, produced utterances which specified both subjects and predicates from the onset of syntax. Thus, earlier theoretical speculations regarding the order of emergence of subjects and predicated held only for one style of syntactic acquisition. This finding is consonant with Bloom (1970) since she found that of her three subjects, the two girls specified all three grammatical relations when they were first observed and the only boy concentrated most heavily on predicate constructions.

SUMMARY OF SYNTACTIC STYLES

The foregoing syntactic analyses reveal two distinct styles of syntactic acquisition. These linguistic styles appear to be sex- and speed- related with specific ties to particular utterance types and grammatical relational specifications. Thus, not only are there individual differences in linguistic acquisition but, these differences are groupable into distinct styles of syntactic acquisition with the differences specifying the characteristics of each style.

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